Considerations on LSP
Teaching
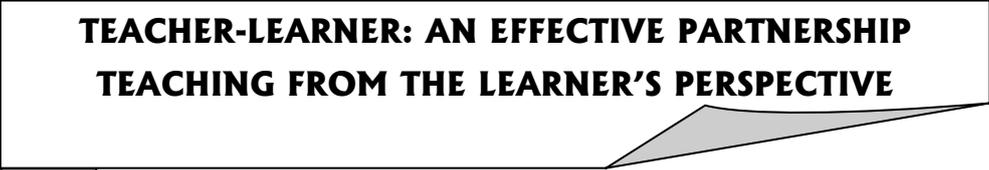
TEACHER-LEARNER: AN EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP TEACHING FROM THE LEARNER'S PERSPECTIVE
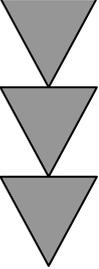
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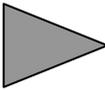
The European Language Portfolio – an innovative teaching / learning tool

The launch of the European Language Portfolio represents a breakthrough that will change the teaching-learning approach. It is designed according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CERF) concerning the core idea of language use for various communicative activities and situations. The Portfolio contains more than one set of descriptors because it takes into account both linguistic competencies - such as the linguistic, socio-linguistic and pragmatic levels – as well as general competencies like the speaker's knowledge of the world, social and practical skills, cultural awareness, attitudes, motivation.

The main advantages of the Portfolio are its reporting and pedagogic functions. The former focuses on results, summative assessment, transparency and comparability, while the latter focuses on the learning process, formative assessment, learning incentives and learning occasions. Its key components are self-assessment grids based on CERF in twenty-six languages and self-assessment checklists. Therefore, the Portfolio has practical applications such as: raising

awareness of individual language competencies and needs (this is to be found in the Portfolio), encouraging non-judgemental self-assessment (Language Biography activities), and adapting and creating activities and worksheets at all levels that clearly 'fit in' with can-do statements.
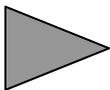
New roles for teachers and students

From the help perspective the teaching-learning process changes, and the learner's role becomes more important and active.

Thus, teaching is no longer regarded as a mere successful transfer of information, but the emphasis lies on the development of intellectual skills. The teaching-learning process with regard to foreign languages should be a 'reflective' one, in the sense that the teacher has to reflect continuously on the learners' progress and the results, and the learners should keep a record of their strengths and weaknesses involved in the foreign language acquisition.

Assessment must be reconsidered as well, as the tendency is to give the learner the chance to participate actively in the evaluation process and self-evaluation must be taken into consideration.

Years of teaching a foreign language have proved that students may be brilliant in class, but when it comes to using language in real-life situations things are different. This has led to the conclusion that, in order to make students able to cope with everyday language, their involvement in the teaching-learning process is essential.

From this point of view, as well as from the CERF perspective, the teacher should no longer be called a 'teacher', but a 'guide' or a 'facilitator', whose job is not to spoon-feed the students with knowledge that has to be taken for granted, but rather to monitor the way in which they manage to combine grammatical structures and vocabulary in real-life-like situations. Moreover, the students should be regarded as 'learners', conscious about the process of acquiring knowledge in a foreign language.

As for the self-evaluation stage, 'reflection' is the key word and the teacher-monitor must facilitate a thorough understanding of the process.

Thus the following question arises: how can a language improvement course offer learners more than just the improvement of language skills or the achievement of a higher level of accuracy and lexical knowledge? The answer lies in training (i) *reflective* language learners, who can compare their articulated competence with the real language they are encountering; (ii) *autonomous* learners who will continue to evolve as competent language users; and (iii) *conscious* learners, who reflect on and become aware of *how* language can be learnt and acquired. From this point of view the learners must be analysts and then become users. As analysts, they have to assume an active and reflective role in the learning process.
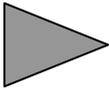
Developing awareness of language learning

Adopting the CERF (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) teachers-monitors must, firstly, be aware of how important it is to change perspectives in learners' mentality. Secondly, their mission is to explain to the students the advantages of this change.

If students are told that their traditional approach to language learning is wrong, they themselves will not be motivated to learn 'in a new way'. But if tutors and learners can collectively review a variety of tasks, and debate their effectiveness in different dimensions, then they can mutually design effective learning techniques. Also by getting students involved in reflecting on the tasks, individual students can determine which techniques are most effective for themselves. Students' learning needs must be assessed and re-assessed continuously as the students' understanding of their needs evolves.

In learning grammar, many students seem to believe that the explicit learning of rules can improve their language competence. But, as Paradis points out: " Practice does not convert explicit knowledge to implicit competence. The explicit knowledge is the knowledge of the rule, as it is enunciated … 'Practice' is not practice of the rule … 'Practice' is the practice of utterances in which the rule is implemented, whether or not the speaker has explicit knowledge of the rule. (Paradis, 1994: 403)

Language awareness will make students look at their own language acquisition in a more flexible way. Thus the Curriculum taken as a whole results in a broader awareness of the sub-components of language acquisition. Though the role of accuracy is highly valued in a learner-education programme, knowledge about the rules does not necessarily constitute proficiency, which Taylor defines as the

"ability to make use of competence" (Taylor, 1988: 166). Stern also reminds us that " It is … a far cry from understanding a grammar rule intellectually and applying it in deliberately designed exercises to its instinctive real-life application in ordinary language use". (Stern, 1992: 174)

Learning vocabulary is a second important issue to be reconsidered. The traditional method was to keep vocabulary exercise books in which the new words appeared in the left-hand column and their mother tongue equivalents in the right-hand one. After class learners would go home and try to memorize them as effectively as possible. But, contextualized vocabulary practice, association tasks, using word cards or working with various types of dictionaries are better means of learning new words. Moreover, most students take it for granted that in every course new vocabulary items will surface that they will be required to learn. They believe that it is the tutor's responsibility to pick out the vocabulary items for them. In fact, the new framework intends to make learners determine for themselves which vocabulary is important. However, when first asked to identify which vocabulary items in a text they want to learn, many look helpless, not knowing how to determine which might be most relevant. The hope is that by having been exposed to a variety of learning techniques, learners will gradually become aware of their own best learning strategies. So the solution to vocabulary building actually becomes that of learner training.

Strategies for improving listening skills are also of great importance and should be regarded from a new perspective. A Hungarian educator has noted the following about university students: " As a result of insufficient exposure or non-exposure to authentic materials, and a lack of appropriate training in listening strategies, a considerable proportion of students are poor listeners. Generally speaking, they are low risk strategy users, they are not flexible enough. They panic for fear of not being able to compete with processing load. They require clear phonetic representation of all parts of the utterance." (Gulyas, 1993: 31)

Therefore, there should be tasks designed to enable learners to perceive that they do not have to understand every word to get the 'gist' of the text.

'What makes a good essay?' seems to be a question that often occurs in learners' minds. In this case they have to become aware that very accurate and fluent language is not enough. Coherence and cohesion are of great importance and they must be achieved. The constant use of criterion referencing in evaluating pieces of writing illustrates that the product can be assessed with a greater degree of objectivity than is often assumed. Students with little experience in writing skills

suppose that the evaluation of the essay will be arbitrary and holistic, depending upon the whims of a particular tutor. Having been introduced to the criteria that matter – accuracy, content, discourse, task achievement – students gain more control over the process of writing by understanding which areas to focus on in producing better drafts.

Clarification of aims is another very important issue, so that the learners have the chance to clearly understand *what* they should achieve at the end of the unit or course. Nunan (1994:58) reminds us that a crucial step in creating motivated, autonomous learners is to clarify the aims of an activity. Learner autonomy might be defined as learners advancing to a better understanding of what language is and what learning is so that they can take a more active part in their own language improvement. In this way, learners begin to take more responsibility for their own language learning and could more easily engage in self-assessment.

Having been given important criteria to use as tools in the language acquisition process, the learners will perceive assessment as a non-threatening way to indicate their progress and level of proficiency. Nevertheless tutors should design tests that are tailored to meet the learners' specific needs, which would make it clear that the evaluation has very precise aims and the results reflect reality as close as possible. In addition to this, self-evaluation confers the test more credibility and gives the learners a comfortable feeling of gaining self-confidence.

In conclusion both tutors and learners should regard learning in general, and the learning of a foreign language as growth, this concept being defined by the American author John Dewey: "…. The aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education; … the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth." (Dewey, 1996: 17)
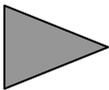
Final remarks

Learning is definitely one of the consequences of change of any kind, and learning one or more foreign languages is a must imposed by both globalization and the expansion of the European Union. It can, however, be argued that while change often, but not necessarily, leads to learning, learning, inevitably, involves change. In this sense, educators should be the facilitators, the providers of favourable conditions for learning, hence change, to take place. Claxton states: "One of the problems with today's education is that it does not see that people are usually not changed but laminated by the giving of information and argument. Their points of

view are very often not developed and expanded but merely overlaid by new knowledge so that what one believes, or the way one looks at things, is not altered but remains buried under a pile of 'facts'". (Claxton, 1989: ix) It is up to us to go beyond that "laminated" surface and create the kind of learning opportunities that will lead to real change and development in our students.

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